

Impractical Pragmatics in *Doing Philosophy at the Movies*

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Richard A. Gilmore (2005) *Doing Philosophy at the Movies*
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Richard A. Gilmore's *Doing Philosophy at the Movies* is based upon a series of articles that have appeared in the journal *Film and Philosophy* over the last few years¹. The essays have been updated and put together in book-form around the theme of the sorts of conversations that occur after going to the movies. This coalesces around a central thesis that, in going to watch popular Hollywood film, we are given an opportunity to engage philosophically in the themes of the film and thus reflect upon different aspects of our lives and become closer to a state of 'philosophical health' (4). The crux of this is summarised in the chapter on *Fargo* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996) and the sublime. In this section Gilmore proposes that the crucial flaw in Jerry's character – the one that leads him to organise the kidnapping of his own wife – is the absence of philosophy. 'What Jerry was lacking, what Jerry really needed, was not more money or more property but more philosophy' (73). The suggestion made throughout the book is that it is not just Jerry who needs more philosophy, but all of us. This notion of philosophy as an elixir to take in the face of the struggles common to humanity is furthered by some keen character and narrative analysis in a wide and varied selection of films throughout the book. Taking a cue

¹ *Film and Philosophy* ed. Daniel Shaw, Journal of the Society for the Philosophic Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts (1996-).

from Stanley Cavell, Gilmore presents film as a site where this philosophical remedy can be democratised – available to anyone with the price of a cinema ticket in their pocket.

The book offers us a number of different examples through which film can help us find this state of well-being. From an analysis of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) as an allegory for the philosophical search for meaning, to the uncanny encounter with our physicality and mortality in contemporary horror films, Gilmore gives us a set of examples in which philosophy and film can come together to help us cope with life in the postmodern world (specifically the contemporary USA). The concepts of love, the sublime, interpretation, identity, aesthetics, dealing with moral ambiguity, and death are approached from a wide range of philosophical perspectives and demonstrated through film.

Yet, taken as a whole, the exercise becomes deeply problematic. Creeping throughout the book and its overt thesis is a troubling relationship between philosophy, film and the democratising principle. On the one hand this is a conception of the activity of philosophy that is as broad and encompassing as it can possibly be. To do this Gilmore places himself firmly in the pragmatic school of philosophical thought. 'Philosophy... should do something' (vii). In the book, philosophy is said to fit into Dewey's schema for it: 'a criticism of criticism'.² That is a tool-set to critique an activity and then create meaning for ourselves through that critique. Through this more skilled and learned approach to our daily lives we will all be able to have fuller, happier existences and thus be able love, live and watch movies as better human beings.

On the other hand, this is not philosophy anymore. Every act that requires human reflection becomes subsumed in it to the extent that philosophy as a category becomes fundamentally empty. For one thing, philosophy is a specialist discipline, a set of trainings in certain bodies of knowledge and certain ways of approaching problems. Gilmore demonstrates this consistently throughout the book. The range of knowledge he exhibits of a disparate variety of philosophical texts is impressive, even if he occasionally draws in too many theoretical positions to really develop his arguments. To expect the median movie goer to have that same theoretical background is absurd. This might be deliberately misconstruing his argument somewhat, but the point is that this is where the democratising possibility of philosophy at the movies falls down. What would be a more constructive perspective, with essentially the same aims, is that the development of critical

² John Dewey *Experience and Nature* in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-53, vol 1, 1925* ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern University Press, 1988) page number not cited.

faculties in any given moviegoer will enable them to reflect more intricately on the films narrative and characters and will thus be more likely to be able to draw possibilities and ideas from the film. Although the book is arguing that to an extent, it becomes meaningless by calling that philosophy. Critical thinking is not automatically philosophy, although philosophy is often the product of a certain variety of it. There are many books out there that may be philosophical but about film, draw upon philosophy, or make claims about the importance of film in our culture, yet without actually being philosophy in the way that Gilmore intends it. There is a name for the work found in such books – film theory. The difference between that, and the way in which, here at least, philosophy is set to interrogate movies is the priority placed upon the medium of film. In this book, film is only important as it aids the premise of attaining philosophical health: Gilmore's telos of critical thought.

There are a number of ways to demonstrate the ways in which this privilege of philosophy over film becomes an insensitivity to the filmic. The first is simply that despite films appearing in the index, they make no such appearance in the footnotes. Maybe this is me being slightly pedantic, the decision of the editors, or a convention I am not aware of; but while the philosophical and literary texts are meticulously footnoted, the films that are the object of analysis do not receive a single one. This is not something I would expect to be a factor in reviewing a book, normally the referencing conventions could be taken for granted. Yet it was particularly strange to find that in a comparison of *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) I would have to check the index to find the dates of the films, and nowhere was title date and director collected in the same place. Whereas the same information for Aristotle's *Poetics* could be found easily in the footnotes. A minor niggle maybe, but a definite case of double standards.

The second is that in several places film and literature get discussed in pretty much the same way with little or no attention paid to their differences (see for instance the movement from *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) to the *Odyssey* (122-123)). This would be less of a problem if the book was not suggesting that the health benefit to be gained was specifically one to do with film. The actual interest in film is the way in which a narrative can support or develop the philosophical argument rather than the properties of the medium itself. Ultimately, what this suggests is that Gilmore has picked film as one possibility out of many. Any form of expression can lead to a reflective analysis, film is not special in this general regard. If Gilmore has picked film as opposed to literature, fine art, music or theatre as the object for this book, either he considers it to not be taken seriously as a form (and thus the book is attempting to provide a corrective for

that), or he is selecting it as the dominant popular narrative medium in the hope of putting forward this thesis of philosophical health to a wide audience. Either way, the philosophy is the thing.

Philosophy may be able to take anything as its analytical object, but in doing so, it should not degrade the analysand as somehow lesser than its analyst. In a way, if Gilmore's democratising principle is to hold, philosophy like film is just one site among many that can be mobilised towards a goal of greater (metaphysical?) health in the demos. But in this rendering, it is primarily philosophy, not film that brings this healthiness about. For instance, the cathartic effect of a film (in reference to *Trainspotting* here (Danny Boyle, 1996)) requires the wisdom of philosophy to be realised: 'We are refreshed, excited, calmed and renewed. We are made aware of what we share with everyone else and in this feeling of unity we get about as much of beauty as Aristotle, or Nietzsche, or Socrates, allows there to be' (119). Films are *allowed* their meaning by philosophy, or have meanings only accessible so far as they are approached philosophically.

This is a fundamental violence being done to film and one in which all sense of its pleasure, its singularity and its *otherness* to philosophy is lost. This is carried on throughout the book as films are read (and read skillfully and learnedly) by the theory that encapsulates each chapter. Philosophy speaks for film, film under this method rarely speaks back. While "'the creation of film was as if made for philosophy'"(ix)³ may hold true, the 'as if' suggests that film is not reducible to a philosophical content.

The point is, that film *does* speak to philosophy in ways that do not simply capitulate to the greater wisdom of the philosophers. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) two affluent young New Yorkers read Nietzsche and decide to prove they are *Übermenschen* above the morality of the ordinary rabble: 'Good and evil, right and wrong were invented for the ordinary average man, the inferior man, because he needs them.' says Brandon. To prove their worth as the next step in human development they murder their friend David and throw a soirée to demonstrate that they feel no guilt at doing away with a lesser mortal. Much of the film is focused on viscerally bringing us into the scene of a dinner party where the guests eat off a sea-chest that is also the victim's coffin. Hitchcock makes us complicit with the murderers; we become part of their reading of Nietzsche, culpable for it as the camera cuts between their anxiety and arrogance. It is only when they are exposed by the teacher who taught them philosophy in the first place that we can feel any relief freed from our identification with the killers through a less totalising interpretation of

³ Gilmore is quoting Stanley Cavell *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of The Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): xii – my emphasis.

Nietzsche's thought. This film made in the aftermath of the Second World War, had a specific aim in taking on not philosophy, but the perils associated with its uses. Hitler had used the rhetoric of a whole host of philosophers, but prominently Nietzsche, and Hitchcock was trying to make sense of this.

While the academy struggled, and continues to struggle (think of the furor over Paul de Man, or the question marks which remain over Heidegger) with the relationship between philosophy and extreme politics, here was a Hollywood film that dealt with the issue in a non-compromising fashion in the immediate aftermath of the War. Both the murderers and their teacher read the same texts, but their conclusions were very different. Hitchcock's suggestion is that philosophy has its limits, it requires sensitivity and wisdom in its interpretation or otherwise it can become pathological as is the case in *Rope* and equally Nazi Germany. Philosophy may be good at describing our experience of the world, creating ideas and dealing with the most complex questions we are faced with, but it cannot simply be turned into direct practice without great peril. Gilmore's position is that:

I never said that going to the movies wasn't a mixed bag. Certainly, there are risks to run at the movies. I just insist that the risks are worth running, although it is best to be prepared for them with some philosophy. (107)

Yet from *Rope* perhaps we can say the opposite is also true: there are risks to run in doing philosophy and, although they are worth the trouble, it is best to prepare for them by watching some movies. In the end, however, that is just as inadequate. We take our wisdom where we find it, albeit from literature, film, philosophy, politics, religion or whatever it is that helps us make sense of things. The important thing is the ability to both contextualise such activities, and to respect their idiosyncrasies, their singularities and their weaknesses. It is something that everyone has to work out for themselves.

While this theory of philosophical health weaves in and out of the chapters, individually they stand on their own, are varied and not governed by it. Each follows a basic structure: an introduction to the film(s) in question leading into an explanation of the theoretical texts; returning to the film in light of theory; developing the theoretical position; then culminating in a conclusion that demonstrates how the film goes to prove the philosophy. Often this will cram a vast array of very different theoretical positions into a very short space of text. Some of the chapters manage this superfluity of theory better than others. 'John Ford's *The Searchers* as an allegory for the philosophical search' (15-32) deals effectively with the mirror image hero/villain characters of Ethan and Scar. 'A *The Usual Suspects* moment in *Vertigo*' (33-56) is definitely worth the time, especially for its sustained analysis of the Hitchcock classic which accurately captures what is at stake in the

film - particularly when it comes to identity and love. 'The American Sublime in *Fargo*' (57-80) is central to the main theme, but it also introduces an idea of the sublime as an encounter with the abyss that will feed into further chapters. 'Visions of Meaning: Seeing and Non-Seeing in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*' (p81-107) links the film closely to the director's life while trying to find a morality from within the seemingly amoral message of the film. 'Oedipus Techs: Time Travel as Redemption in *The Terminator* and *12 Monkeys*' (95-108) leads with a neat comparison between the two films suggesting that time travel is a metaphor for postmodern anxieties and ending in a return to the theme of love. 'Into the Toilet: Some Classical Aesthetic Themes Raised by a Scene in *Trainspotting*' (109-120) makes use of the Dionysian/Apollonian opposition to make a Lucretian case for moderation in a pleasurable encounter with our physicality. Finally, the conclusion, 'The Dialectics of Interpretation' (141-162), goes from Plato to Wittgenstein to Baudrillard to Bloom to Dewey to De Beauvoir so rapidly that it leaves the reader struggling to pick up where one idea starts and another finishes, but argues the endless possibilities for interpretation without ever really sounding convinced.

Aptly, although this final chapter whistles through so many ideas that it seems an accurate reflection of the rest of the book, it also contains an idea which is the book's saving grace and is hovering, undeveloped, throughout the arguments of the individual chapters. This is the development of Bloom's use of the Khabbalaic '*Zimzum*, or *Tsimtsum*' myth. The term refers to the contraction of God's essence to make space for his creation – 'a moment when one finds oneself in a situation that is underdetermined, in which there has been, as it were, a withdrawal of meaning' (149) and it calls on us to make a judgment. In nascent form, this is the culmination of all Gilmore's arguments about aesthetics, the sublime, ambiguity and most powerfully love. If we find ourselves in a position where we do not have the ability to make a rational decision it's often not because we have too many options but too few. The *Zimzum* moment encourages us to be open to the other in a 'receptive encounter with another person in whom the possibility of love for you resides' (106). If these strands had been tied together this would have been a powerful treatise reading love through film as a possibility that comes about only in the face of radical underdetermination. Unfortunately the links that would make this reading hold are submerged by the main argument of the book.

Individually chapters will be useful to people studying specific films or themes. They cover a lot ground philosophically and contain strong examples of narrative based analysis. Collectively if you are interested in philosophy and want a loose argument in how it can be related to film, then this could be a useful book. Maybe the central argument

would reassure philosophy undergraduates about the value of studying film, but I think that there are better ways to do that, more direct and more sensitive to the filmic, than those put forward in this book. Hopefully the next book we see from Gilmore will be called something along the lines of *Film: The Sublime Art of Love*, and that would surely make up for all the shortcomings here.